

Summer 2002

The Final Frontier: Using Space under 2040

John Provo

Portland State University

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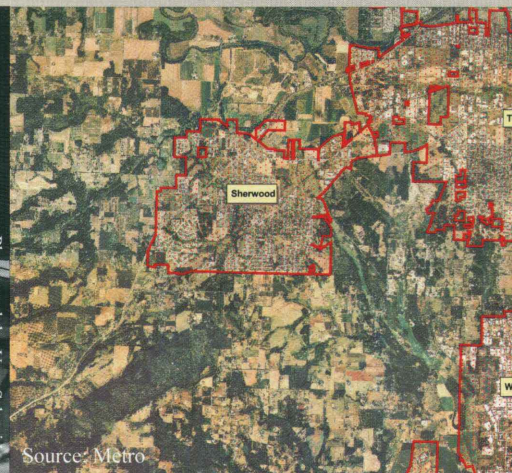
Provo, John (2002). "The Final Frontier: Using Space under 2040," Metroscope, Summer 2002, pages 20-25. Published by Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies, Nohad A. Toulon School of Urban Studies & Planning, Portland State University.

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The Final Frontier: Using Space Under 2040

A conversation about open space, density, and quality of life

Moderated by John Provo



Photograph by Uwe Schneider

Source: Metro

Panelists Nick Wilson, Kelly Ross, Mary Kyle McCurdy, Carl Hosticka, and moderator, John Provo.

Later this year the Metro Council will face a decision about expansion of the urban growth boundary (UGB). Reaching a verdict on that question will require negotiating the conflicts between the long term regional vision described in Metro's 2040 Plan, short-term economic fluctuations, and specific local concerns. Looking at possible tradeoffs and choices facing the region, panelists at a recent *Metroscape*™ forum on these topics were asked to discuss the connections among implementation, design, and market challenges involved in planning for the integration of open space with denser development in regional centers.

What follows are excerpts from a panel discussion that took place at Portland State University in April, 2002. The full transcript is available at the Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies' website (www.upa.pdx.edu/IMS/). Panelists represented diverse perspectives: regional and local planning, elected officials, design professionals, and advocates for different perspectives on growth management issues.

Carl Hosticka, Presiding Officer with the Metro Council, is in his first term in office. Hosticka is a professor of public policy at the University of Oregon Portland Center and was a state representative from Lane County from 1983-1994.

Mary Kyle McCurdy is a staff attorney with 1000 Friends of Oregon, an advocacy, educational, and research organization on growth issues that was founded in 1975. McCurdy has dealt with urban issues and Metro for about 12 years.

Kelly Ross is Government Affairs Director for the Home Builders Association of Metropolitan Portland, an association of builders, developers, and related businesses involved with the residential construction industry.

Nick Wilson is a partner in the firm ATLAS Landscape Architecture and has been involved in design work throughout the Northwest. Wilson also chaired the Tigard Planning Commission for the past seven years and has been involved in planning for the Washington Square Regional Center.

John Provo, the moderator, is a PhD student in Portland State University's School of Urban Studies and Planning, and a research assistant at the Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies.

Provo: Five years after the start of 2040 planning, how are we doing, and how are we shaping decisions about the UGB and the region's future? Is 2040 a sound environmental policy? Does it produce market-feasible development? Is it a politically sustainable vision?

Hosticka: I am an academic and an elected official. As an academic I am responsible for looking at the evidence, weighing the evidence, and determining what the evidence tells me. As an elected official I am allowed to make all sorts of opinions and statements and, in fact, a lot of decisions based on no evidence at all. There is a serious problem in that the kind of evidence that academics usually use to

answer the question "how are we doing" is often ambiguous, incomplete, and inconclusive. And yet we have to continue to make decisions in the policy arena about where we're going. To a large extent those decisions are based upon essentially personal considerations about how people feel about where they live and what their aspirations and individual hopes and dreams are about the place.

I think the one thing we can say right now is that the people are very conflicted, that there is no uniformity of opinion about whether or not we're doing well except for the fact that when you ask people what other metropolitan area they would rather live in, you usually draw a blank. You don't find many people saying, "I would rather live in Seattle or Phoenix or some other place."

The 2040 concept that Metro put forward is an attempt to bring together a number of different goals – to maintain a compact urban form, to protect farmland, to maintain open space, to protect fish and wildlife and livability. The general thrust is to concentrate development to a greater extent in certain centers and nodes, like Washington Square, for example. My general sense is that how are we doing is a question that we continue to have to answer every year. Frustration with the existing land use system is reaching a higher pitch than it has in the past. We have to continue assessing our goals in order to determine how best to meet them.

McCurdy: I'd like to talk about the big picture. I think there is this notion that the whole area is uniformly densifying, that the new growth in employment and households is largely going to be absorbed in centers. But there's a hierarchy of mixed use centers in terms of scale and density, so they are going to be quite diverse, and I think it's important to keep that in mind.

The 2040 growth concept is critical to maintaining the environment. Metro at the beginning of this whole process estimated how much the UGB would have to expand if we accommodated growth in the future at the same development patterns we used throughout the early 1990s. They estimated that the UGB would have to increase by 120,000 acres, a 52% increase over what it is now. That much more urbanization across the countryside is clearly not an environmentally sound strategy. The compact urban form focused on the centers is critical to maintaining our natural environment inside and outside the UGB. But Metro just isn't designating where development goes. It is inventorying and protecting riparian areas and wildlife habitat, and that will be translated down to local plans. They also have a green spaces acquisition program that's funded by a bond that passed in 1995. Metro has

purchased over 6,000 acres of land for protection in and around the UGB. Some of that money went to local jurisdictions for the purchase of parks, but I think the 2040 urban growth concept has been critical to maintaining environmental quality. And that means we have to focus inside the UGB, not just on how big it is.

Production of market feasible housing is clearly taking place. Not everyone's looking for a single family home, and I think that the Metro plan provides options that in many ways weren't here 10 years ago – townhouses and row houses, for example. A key issue is design. That's not part of Metro's purview. That falls to local community. How do the residential-commercial or other structures being built fit into their surroundings? Are they compatible in scale and architectural features? How do they look if you're walking down the sidewalk? Is there a sidewalk? Is the community accessible? How are buildings oriented towards one another? Is there open space?

Ross: We at the Home Builders Association of Metropolitan Portland are perceived as being opponents of the UGB, but in fact we've always been supporters of the concept itself. It makes a lot of sense to draw a line and plan for development so that you know where the parts are going to go on the ground, what the new development is going to look like in 15 or 20 years, or how you're going to target your tax dollars. We have been somewhat critical of the management of the UGB in the last four or five years, especially as the population has grown quickly in the 1990s, and we have expressed concerns about possible trade-offs and compromises that are likely to occur if we continue on the path we are on. We've advocated for what we consider very moderate and minimal expansion of the UGB to allow a little more land for the future.

There is in fact a lot of dense development occurring as a result of the 2040 plan. You have infill development and redevelopment, in the hills, on or over parking lots. Parcels that were created 50 years ago that are now on the invisible land boundary have become more valuable. The owner of those homes is thinking, "partition off large back yards and side yards and create some more market." That's occurring a lot. In fact, Metro's last urban growth report projected that about 28% of all new development was to occur through infill. I think that, as we talk about political sustainability of the system, it's that kind of development that is causing some unrest.

The area where I live in Washington County previously was an established neighborhood. Now large pockets of row houses are being plopped

down among these single-family dwellings. It makes more residents in the neighborhood, more cars on the road, so there is concern. While it is a very worthwhile goal to use land more efficiently and to contain the urban growth, it has to be balanced, and you have to be aware of the consequences.

Another concern was raised about the impact of the impermeable surface on fish habitat and water quality. I know it's a controversial issue, and I don't think there's any clear findings on either side, but, again, that's very much a compromise of new development. There's going to be more concrete and asphalt on the ground, more roads per acre of land keeping water from percolating into the soil.

We need to realize that trade-offs do not come free. They involve sacrifices from everyone who wants to live in the region. We have to make sure that the public is aware of the sacrifices and is educated about the issues as we make our decisions.

Wilson: Landscape architecture is my work. My passion is design. We've done some work at Orenco Station. We've done design work at Fairview Village. We've been involved in the layout of the Washington State University campus at Vancouver from the beginning of the Master Plan through final construction phase. I'm the guy who picks the park benches, who determines where the trees go, where the sidewalks go, what color the bricks are, all that kind of stuff. I'm the guy who's involved and participating on the ground.

Along with that, I am a Planning Commission member. I'm the guy who reviews the plans of the actual development going in, and I'm there up until sometimes 1:00 a.m. listening to irate neighbors who are telling us over and over again that if this development goes forward, the quality of life in their neighborhood is going to go down the tubes. I've seen a lot of changes over the past seven years. For every Orenco Station or Fairview Village, there are many, many, many compact developments that are not planned or not well planned or that are plain old vanilla apartment complexes. We tend to highlight our successes, but they might not be the norm. So I would tend to agree with Kelly [Ross] – some issues really don't reflect so much whether you support 2040 or full growth, but to what degree, to what extent, there are trade-offs.

Provo: Is 2040 sound environmental policy? More specifically, can we have this development within the UGB and maintain open space?

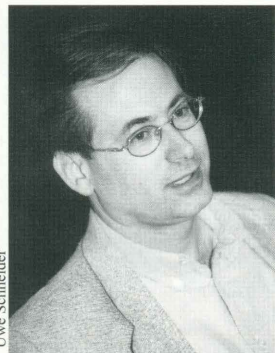
Hosticka: We are trying to identify both fish and wildlife habitats that exist now and give them some sort of protection. We have also agreed that when protecting land within the boundary takes away from the availability of land for development within the boundary, we would have to consider expansion of the boundary in order to make up the difference.

I don't see an inevitable trade-off or that Metro is forcing the trade-off between urban boundary and environmental protection. Urbanization is not good for the environment in general, so you must be as sensitive as you can. The simple fact that more and more people are moving here means that the natural environment is going to suffer. I don't think that any of us could sit here with a straight face and say that's not going to happen. So we have to figure out how we're going to protect what we have as much as possible and restore what we can along the way.

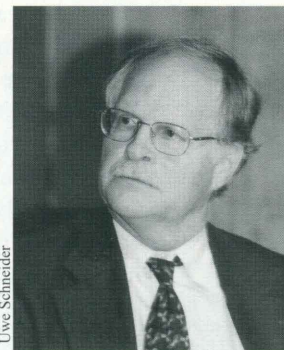
Design is a key ingredient. We can sit at the regional level and talk big time and throw numbers back and forth at each other, but it really comes down to specific areas like the Washington Square Regional Center where there are sensitive wetlands that are being designated for protection and restoration right next to an area where we are expecting very high density development. So if you can come up with a design that accommodates both, that's where you are going to improve all these concepts.

McCurdy: I think the question is more complex than whether or not 2040 is environmentally sound. We have something like eight parking spots for every human in Portland. The big surface issues are parking lots and roads, not rooftops. For every single-family house, we get a driveway. You put four single families into a four block, you get one driveway and one rooftop, so it's not just a density versus environment issue at all. I think of it as growth – do you have the good kind or the bad kind? There's a lot of inefficient sprawl within our UGB. Just because we have a UGB doesn't mean that we are compact everywhere. Take back some of those parking lots. Metro has an extensive study, and a model guidebook for how to develop green sidewalks.

Ross: Preserving open space within the UGB is becoming much more expensive. The price of land has grown fairly significantly over the last 10 years. Raw land, raw vacant land, was selling for about



Nick Wilson



Carl Hosticka

\$40,000 an acre in the early part of the decade. Today it is selling for around \$250,000 an acre. Metro purchased 7,000 acres, and about 6,000 acres of that is outside the UGB simply because they can get more bang for their buck outside the boundary. The average price paid for the open space land inside the boundary is about \$45,000 an acre, and outside the boundary about \$8,000 an acre.

Right now, under State law, expanding the UGB requires considering whether or not you are expanding onto farmland, which you avoid at all cost, or expanding onto land that had some rural residential development. There is huge competition because of the greatly increased property value. If a property owner is willing to give up part of the development rights on open space land as a condition of coming in, why doesn't the State Legislature include that consideration? That's a challenge ahead on open space.

Provo: Does 2040 produce affordable housing in communities that people want to live in?

Wilson: I think about development coming into the Planning Commission over the seven years that I was there, and how it changed over that time. That was a time when the markets grew, and also a time during which the City of Tigard was built up. We see more and denser housing. We see row houses. At the same time, we are seeing the lots get smaller and smaller and smaller. The backyard, in many cases, is disappearing in an attempt to remain detached. I'm just looking at my anecdotal evidence, but I would assume that it's because our code requires it. Another very negative trend is occurring in Tigard, which has a lot of wooded ravines that are usually very steep and have streams associated with them. Maybe there's one house on the parcel of five acres. Builders are allowed to transfer those landscapes, so they're leaving much of the green space alone and cramming eight or 10 houses in a postage stamp size area.

McCurdy: I think the growth boundary actually increases the choices because it actually opens up a market for housing options other than the traditional single family home. It's fair to say that the trend will only last a few years. Most of the Portland area home building has been thrown open to the small business in the building community. They exist on new housing products. However, in the market, it has taken a lot of public-private invest-

ment to jump-start some things, like the Belmont area and some of the development around PSU, where government comes in and does special plans.

Hosticka: The academic side of me says this question is virtually unanswerable. First of all, there are lots of markets, and that's something that becomes more apparent to me as I try to look at the issues regionally. Pearl District, the Union Station Area, Belmont Dairy – those may or may not happen with or without Metro because natural forces that are national, in fact global, are pushing for increased density in urban cores due to people's preferences to live in that type of housing. So, is it market feasible? Sure, people are paying money. They're lining up to pay money to live in the Pearl District. Is that because of Metro policy? I don't know whether I can answer that. In Tigard, and in the suburbs, we see a very wide variety. What the market supports is a very hard thing to say in this kind of environment.

Ross: There is also the very unique nature of the Portland housing market. It's not a value judgment. The average residential subdivision in the Portland area is about 92 lots. For any other metropolitan area, the average is way over a hundred lots. The other part of it is the availability of land. It's simply not there. In places like Las Vegas and Phoenix, you talk about developing a thousand acres. Here you talk about developing 20 acres at a time. They point to the great design projects like Orenco Station and Fairview Village. Orenco started out at 200 acres or so, and Fairview Village was probably only a quarter of that, so you have a major blank slate there where you can do some creative things. When you are developing four acres at a time and you have a requirement that you have to meet density figures, you have to site so many housing units there. To a certain extent, that is a function of state land use law, which requires Metro to look first at so-called exception land, which are areas that have already been parcelized, if we're going to expand the boundary. The inevitable effect of the state land use law is that you are going to have smaller tracts for people to plan for and to build on. I think there's no question about that.

McCurdy: But what Kelly [Ross] is saying has been true historically as well. It all goes back to the scale of Portland. It's different here from other places. In a place like California where builders are constructing a 1,000-unit subdivision, they can often dedicate parkland to the school site along with it. That isn't something that happens here very



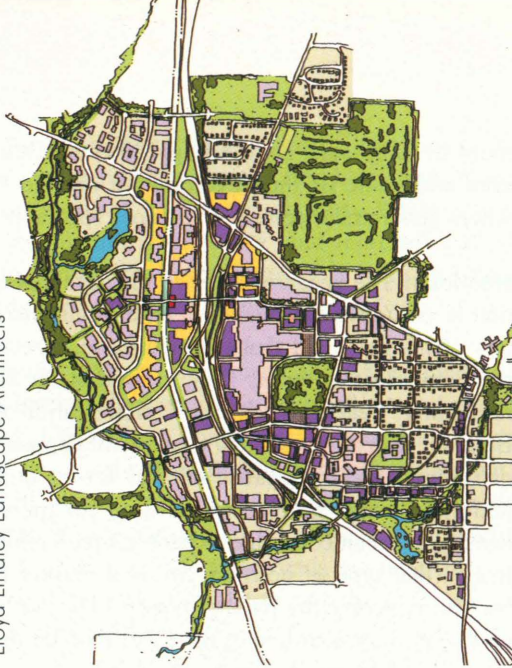
Kelly Ross

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Mary Kyle McCurdy

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often, especially now that fees are collected for parks, not for schools. The remaining big parcels are on the west-side and on prime farmland, so even if we do expand the boundary, that's the last place we go. The most likely areas are on the east-side down to Damascus, where there are five-to-10 acre parcels, and maybe 20 in some cases.

Provo: Everyone agrees that from a development point of view, there is market feasible development in 2040, like Orenco Station and the Belmont Dairy. But at the same time, people are moving further and further out.

McCurdy: I think we have to look at the whole issue of affordability rather than just part of it. It's your transportation cost too. If you move to Vancouver, or farther out, you are more likely to need a car, maybe two. There is an estimate that if you reduce your household ownership by one car, you retain \$5,000-to-\$8,000 a year in money not spent on your car. Some home loan programs credit you with that much more income if you live in an area where you don't have to rely on that car. But definitely we are experiencing a revival of our urban core in the Portland area. There is a boundary between revitalization and gentrification, and I think we need to be really careful about that. Also, the other side of the housing affordability issue will be the affordability in wages. We still have historically low wages here relative to the national average. We need to be very aware, because it is critical that we offer affordable housing options. The land use issue is only one side. We made plans available for a variety of housing types, but you can still spend \$400,000 on a small house or condo.

Ross: Certain types of housing attract people with

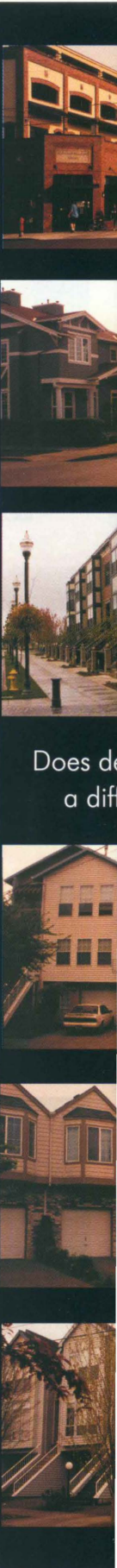
families, people with children, as opposed to people without children. Generally, the dense environment doesn't feel as safe for kids. The reason you see schools closing in the Portland School District is not so much because the schools are bad or it's not a desirable place to live. Those lots are actually bigger. Your average 5,000 square-foot lot is bigger than lots in the suburbs. But the houses are small. People are buying larger houses. That's why you see the declining school districts in Portland. Additionally, in the Pearl District, for example, children are always absent. To some extent, we have made a conscious policy choice through Metro's projections that 6% more people are going to live in apartments by 2040 and about 20% more people will live in attached housing.

Hosticka: I think that's a very important point. When we sit over on the other side of the river in Metro headquarters, what we get is, how many people, what's the average number of people per housing unit. Those are the numbers we start with. The average number of people per housing unit is projected to go down because of demographic changes. But we don't get any finer than that. Then we go out and we hear discussion. Today, there's a lot of talk about a national trend of older people moving back into the city once the children are gone. They want to move to a denser place. I think it's fair for everybody to say that younger people with children want a less dense place.

Audience Question: Why do people dislike density so much? Are their fears about density irrational or wrong, or are they correct in what they have been seeing. What would be the solutions to address people's fears about density?

Hosticka: I think this is a political feasibility question. And I think it's a very serious question, because to a certain extent, it's somewhat similar to the property tax revolt that started in the late 1970s. In that instance, the political system tried to hold it down, defeat it, defuse it, and didn't address it directly for a long time until it disrupted the whole system. We may be seeing the same thing in the land use system. I think there is a deep division in the community.

A PGE poll tells us 49% of the people want more growth, and 49% of the people say they don't want more growth. We don't have a clear consensus on these issues right now. But my sense is that the area was originally settled by people who came because they wanted to get away from the city. Now the city has come over the hill to them. But, those people



Does density
a difference?



make
ce?



who are now residents there – and I believe it's the majority in areas like Tigard, Tualatin, and the inner parts of Beaverton – are people who didn't start in downtown Portland and come over the hill. They are people who came from New York, California, Washington – and they like it. So you have conflict with people who have this typical American dream of the suburban quarter acre lot with play equipment in the back and a yard seeing their vision being threatened. Then you have the newcomers coming and saying, boy, I love Portland, and I don't want anyone else to make it any worse.

The majority of the people aren't optimistic that the future is going to be better than the past anymore, which is a change in the political environment. So ballot measures really give us some information. It's a place where we're going to get information to the extent that people are paying attention and care. Average citizens may or may not get two minutes worth of media bombarding them before they're actually casting a vote. To that extent, it is going to be hard to interpret the result as a mandate one way or another, but it's certainly going to give us a piece of information that's going to be used in our thinking as we go ahead in making decisions.

Wilson: I would agree with Carl [Hosticka] that we've all known for a long time through repeated public opinion polls that there's a form of schizophrenia out there. When you talk to people about growth and planning, you ask them if they want to keep their UGB tight, and they say yes. Do you think density should increase? Yes. Then you ask them, is your neighborhood an appropriate place for increased density, and they say no. This isn't a physical science like physics or math. It's a social science that involves people, and they don't act predictably. They often act very unpredictably and irrationally. I think the system is really going through some growing pains here. It's at something of a crossroads. It will be very interesting to see what happens.

Hosticka: I've found a very interesting phenomenon about the UGB and the politics of the UGB. To a certain extent, the farther away you are from the UGB, the more you like it. Just look at how people vote. If you look at a map, the people in the center are going to be very heavily in favor of the UGB. And the closer you are [to the UGB], the more you like it too. The most correspondence I get as an elected representative is from people who are either just on the other side in their small lot that's five acres or two acres that say, don't expand next to me because I don't want all that density in my neigh-

borhood. I have this little rural lifestyle I want to preserve. Or people who are just on this side of the UGB are saying don't expand it, because I like to look out there and see green, and I don't want all the traffic from the people who are coming from the other side. So right along the edge, there's very strong support for keeping it where it is. It's in the middle ring where the densification, the change of the neighborhood, is happening, where the political controversy is really the most intense.

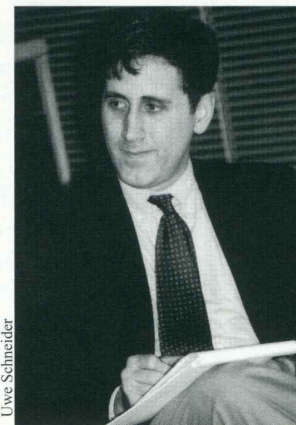
Provo: If there was something that you wanted us to remember that we talked about today, or if there is one thing that we haven't gotten to but you wish we had, what would that be?

Wilson: We talked about trade-offs. Market forces are a huge issue, and I think that understanding and respecting the power of market forces could circumvent what we are trying to do, or undermine it, or support it.

Ross: One thing that we've touched on and that I find really fascinating is that there hasn't been much research done on the interaction and impact on public school systems by land use planning. We're talking about the decline in the Portland Public School system, and there are theories on its causes. If districts are grappling with the problem of how to increase school capacity, and densities increase as infill occurs in neighborhoods where established schools are filled from a much smaller population, how do you think outside the box and think of new designs for schools? Bulldoze schools and start over again? There's a wealth of emotional traumas and factors involved in that debate.

McCurdy: Design matters, and I think that it is a really important issue. I think we should be looking a lot more at design at the local level.

Hosticka: This is still an experiment as to whether or not, in a democratic system, people in the metropolitan region of over one million residents, can self-consciously plan what that metropolitan region will look like and try to balance a wide variety of goals in an evolving society. We don't know the answer to that. Hopefully, if we are committed to evolving, we will learn that we don't have all the answers, probably won't have all the answers, and that the answers we had 30 years ago may not be the answers we need for the next 30 years. It's an evolutionary process, and we're learning. ■



Uwe Schneider

John Provo